

# A Puppeteer's Journey

— Estelle Bryer

*This article is an abridged version of the introduction to Estelle's new book, The Rainbow Puppet Theatre Book: Fourteen Classic Puppet Plays (WECAN, 2013). Estelle has performed for thousands of adults and children throughout her lifetime of work with puppetry, and her story can provide inspiration and encouragement for those who are striving to bring this ancient art into the modern world.*

For centuries now, puppet plays have been a source of pleasure. It does not matter whether the text is in one language or another, whether the story is presented in a shopping center or in a palace, or whether the puppets are worked by strings, worn on the hands, moved by rods; puppets are always fascinating to human beings. For these miniature actors are surrounded by an atmosphere of unreality and fantasy, of magic, mystery and dreams—and in addition their humor and satire afford delightful entertainment.

In these little figures there is a mysterious power that casts such a spell over children and grown-ups alike that they are bewitched into imagining living creatures of flesh and blood in place of puppets made of wood or other materials. The illusion is so powerful that even visible puppeteers, strings, and rods are not perceived at all. The audience sees only what it wants to see; indeed it is so gripped by the play that the imagination makes its own contribution and they see much more: laughing and weeping and the whole gamut of emotions mirrored in the puppet faces. There is a co-operation of understanding and love between the puppet and puppeteer. The puppet is the voice, feeling, and sentiment of the puppeteer, and so it is given life.

Nobody knows when these mysteries began. There is a Chinese legend, supposed to be of the tenth century BC, that tells of a puppet master who had to cut open his puppets in order to convince the emperor that they could not make love to the emperor's wives. This may be the earliest reference to puppet performances.

The puppet play of Dr. Faustus, which Goethe saw as a young boy, impressed him so deeply that fifty years later he created his Faust out of it. As he said in his autobiography, "The weighty theme of the Faust

puppet play resounded and reverberated once more in me, in a rapturous medley of sound." He also said, "Children must have plays and puppets." Until he was fourteen, Friedrich Schiller liked best to play with a puppet theatre, in which, with his sister, he would perform tragedies of his own invention. A similar story is told of Richard Wagner.

In recent years there has been a gratifying increase in the number of professional and amateur puppet groups; these groups are a living source of creative and artistic talent. One finds puppet groups in children's hospitals, in the treatment of soul disturbances, in traffic education, therapy for speech problems, and help for victims of war, AIDS, and much more.

In therapy, when a child puts his hand into a puppet he takes on a different role. He can talk and act as he wishes and all is safe. When a child talks "to" a puppet, the puppet actually acts as a mediator, as a third person. The child does not feel confronted by another ego; he feels that he is free to speak or react safely, and will not be judged.

Television has opened up a new field for puppets, but unfortunately, here another element slips in, for the puppets are being mechanically and electronically dehumanized. They have become contrary to what Rudolf Steiner wanted when he said to Hedwig Hauck (the puppeteer in Berlin whom he guided in the art): "Puppetry is a remedy against the ravages of civilization," and told her to write this statement down because it was so important.

Dr. Helmut Von Kügelgen, who was the head of the international Waldorf kindergarten association, described how in 1917, Leonhard Gem and Hedwig Hauck (painters and sculptors) asked Steiner for advice on how to build a puppet theatre for a day care center where the children were from four to twelve



*Jason and the Grey Witch is one of Estelle's most widely performed plays*

years old. Steiner became deeply involved in this, and insisted that the marionettes must hang on threads tied directly to the fingers (not a cross bar), directed from above. (See "Marionette Theater: Posing a Task for Socially Oriented Education" in *An Overview of the Waldorf Kindergarten*, edited by Joan Almon.) Steiner's indications were only for marionettes, since that was what he was asked about, but other forms of puppetry have since been developed in harmony with his indications.

In the first theatre there were three curtains of different colors, which were raised one at a time to create a dream-like environment. Rudolf Steiner said that marionettes cannot speak; that the fairy tales must be read to the children by a narrator who should sit on a chair nearby. He said that the reading of the tale should be simple and natural and the different people characterized with the voice.

Steiner laid special emphasis on the right style and color of the costume fabric, which are concerned with the soul characteristics of the characters. For example, gold is appropriate for a prince or king, representing the ego. Steiner was particularly interested in stage lighting and scenery, and everything was done with one purpose in mind: as he said, "We must do everything in our power to help the children to develop fantasy."

My own entry into this wonderful world of puppetry was the reaction of my daughters Janni and Lindy, then seven and five years old, to beautiful wooden Swiss puppets that I bought in 1959. There was a King puppet, and they were instructed by him to stand up when he entered, bow to him and say, "Good morning, your Majesty." This they dutifully did. A few weeks

later I performed *The Frog Prince* (which they had not seen) for them and all their friends. When the King entered in the middle of the story, they both jumped to their feet in all earnestness, bowed and said, "Good morning, your Majesty." As they were totally "in" the story he turned to them and said, "Thank you. You may now sit." And the story went on.

I was quite stunned by this at the time, and it left me with many questions, which encouraged my research over the years.

In 1961, when I was teaching in the Waldorf kindergarten my daughter's first grade teacher, Felicitas Fuhs, arrived out of the Camphill Movement. She was an extraordinarily creative woman, being a musician, eurythmist, and puppeteer. Her beautiful glove-puppets were made out of molded felt and the clothes and scenery were of silk. I was soon her ardent pupil, and with her portable theatre we performed fairy tales at schools and hospitals to raise funds to buy musical instruments for her class orchestra.

After Felicitas left and our school moved to its present site in Constantia (Cape Town), I worked with my kindergarten colleague Janine Hurner, who had worked with Clara Hatterman, to build a small but permanent glove-puppet theatre in the kindergarten and, together with parents, created seven beautiful Grimm's Fairy Tales that we performed regularly for the children and the general public. We also performed, for our kindergarten, the usual table and marionette plays.

Because of the obvious harmful effects on the children of films at birthday parties I constructed a small solo theatre, created fairy tale plays, and performed at the birthday parties of the children of our kindergarten. Soon I was performing at birthdays throughout Cape Town to children of all different races, cultures, and religious backgrounds.

These birthday party shows are both challenging and rewarding. No matter how rowdy and precociously intellectual the children are to begin with, the magic of the live fairy tale, brought with soft voice, clear speech, and singing, soon has its effect, much to the astonishment of the adults. So rewarding to me are these birthday puppet shows that I have continued them for more than forty-five years, averaging about seventy per year. (See "Scenes from a Nursery Rhyme Puppet Play" in this issue for an example of one of a successful birthday party play.)

On seeing the noisy rubbish shown in puppet shows at shopping centers during the school holidays, with distorted amplifiers on full blast, I decided after much deliberation that it would be far the lesser of two

evils for the masses of children to see a beautiful fairy tale with good amplification versus what they were then suffering. I therefore created a larger solo theatre with better lighting and invested in the best sound equipment. Even under those circumstances the mood of the fairy tale is miraculous. Time after time what began as a rowdy supermarket setting was transformed into a peaceful, enriched atmosphere.

Another project was to perform at our most expensive and exclusive health spa. To this spa come politicians, industrialists and other members of the elite. As I was giving regular talks there on eurythmy therapy, followed by a eurythmy class, the management discovered that I was also a puppeteer and so suggested a puppet show. The idea seemed utterly ridiculous, but it worked extremely well at the tail end of a talk on the threefold human being, which led on to education, then to the small child, fairy tales and lastly the puppet show. *Mother Holle*, which can be understood on many levels, was a good choice for this setting. Even these “exclusive and enlightened” audiences responded with glowing faces and warm comments. These talks continued for three years.

The principals of schools in an economically deprived area were distressed when the crime rate in their area soared by 700% in four years, and asked me

for an appropriate puppet show to counteract this.

This new venture was so successful that I devoted two mornings per week to it, doing two or three performances per morning per school. The largest room in the school was packed tight with up to 250 children at a time, sitting on the floor or on carpets. In this way up to 20,000 children per year attended performances for three years.

Teachers and social workers in the schools for black children then asked for a play to help the children in the Townships to overcome their particular problems. These children live in great poverty, many in tin shacks with no electricity, toilets, one water tap to serve many houses, and no flowers or grass; a totally grey environment.

It is impossible to describe the joy these deprived children experienced through the puppet play. The scenery with its many colorful flowers had them gasping with delight. Their eyes would become enormous; they would sing and clap their hands and laugh and become serious, and were by far the most responsive and rewarding of all audiences; this applies to the adults as well. Although they are outwardly deprived, they have inner riches still.

In 1992 my dream was realized in the creation of the beautiful Rainbow Puppet Theatre, the only permanent one in the country, at the Waldorf School in Constantia. It seats 110 and we give two performances every Saturday morning for the general public. Every month we change fairy tales. There are up to six of us in the company and we have performed thirteen different plays—mostly from the Brothers Grimm. Many children have come to Waldorf education through visiting this theatre.

Our greatest “hit” was in the making of eight “Anthropuppets,” look-alike caricatures of various members of the Cape Town Anthroposophical Society, including eurythmy teachers, and inserting skits into the current stories (*Saint George and the Dragon*, *Red Riding Hood*, and *Briar Rose*). These then became hilariously funny. They were performed in the evenings for adults and the response was tremendous.

Puppetry is not only enriching for the children but also for us puppeteers, for we are enlivened by each performance and find a connection to inexhaustible sources of creativity. As many children as possible need whatever seeds we can consciously sow to strengthen them against the challenges they face. Through puppetry, one can reach many people in an art that truly is a blessing to all who behold or participate in it. ♦



Performing *Saint George and the Dragon*